



UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

Region 6

1445 Ross Avenue, Suite 1200

Dallas, TX 75202-2733

June 28, 2013

Erin Flanagan, Project Manager
Denver Service Center, Planning Division
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
12795 W. Alameda Parkway
P.O. Box 25287
Denver, Colorado 80225-0287

RE: Detailed Comment Letter for Big Thicket National Preserve (Big Thicket)
Draft General Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement
Hardin, Jasper, Jefferson, Liberty, Orange, Polk, and Tyler Counties in southeast Texas

Dear Mr. Flanagan:

In accordance with our responsibilities under Section 309 of the Clean Air Act (CAA), the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations for implementing NEPA, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Region 6 office in Dallas, Texas, has completed its review of the Draft General Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (GMP/DEIS) prepared by the National Park Service (NPS).

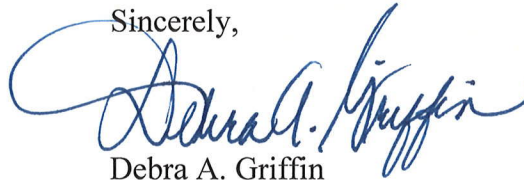
The GMP/DEIS evaluates the impacts of NPS' proposal to update a 1980 management plan for the preserve and respond to changed conditions within the preserve since then. The GMP describes the general path the NPS intends to follow in managing the preserve for the next 15 to 20 years. The GMP/DEIS describes and analyzes the potential impacts from four alternative actions and proposed management strategies for resource protection and preservation, cultural resources, natural resources, visitor use and experience, socioeconomic environment, and the preserve's operations and facilities. Alternative 2 (NPS' Preferred Alternative) endorses a broad ecosystem perspective for protection of substantial portions of the preserve, partnerships with public and private organizations, expansion of visitor opportunities, preservation and protection of significant cultural resources, regional planning, and sustainable development practices.

EPA rates the DEIS as "EC-2", i.e., EPA has "environmental concerns and requests additional information" in the Final EIS (FEIS). EPA's Rating System Criteria can be found here: <http://www.epa.gov/oecaerth/nepa/comments/ratings.html>. The "EC" rating is based on the potential for adverse impacts. The "2" indicates the DEIS does not contain sufficient information to fully assess the impact of the action and additional information is requested. Detailed comments are enclosed with this letter which clearly identifies our concerns and the

informational needs requested for incorporation in to the Final EIS (FEIS). Responses to comments should be placed in a dedicated section of the FEIS and should include the specific location where the revision, if any, was made. If no revision was made, a clear explanation should be included.

EPA appreciates the opportunity to review the GMP/DEIS. Please send our office two copies of the FEIS, and an internet link, when it is sent to the Office of Federal Activities, EPA (Mail Code 22252A), Ariel Rios Federal Building, 1200 Pennsylvania Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20004. Our classification will be published on the EPA website, www.epa.gov, according to our responsibility under Section 309 of the CAA to inform the public of our views on the proposed Federal action. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Kimeka Price of at 214-665-7438 or via email at price.kimeka@epa.gov for assistance.

Sincerely,



Debra A. Griffin
Associate Director
Compliance Assurance and
Enforcement Division

Enclosure

**DETAILED COMMENTS ON
THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT
AND GENERAL MANAGEMENT PLAN
FOR THE BIG THICKET NATIONAL PRESERVE IN
HARDIN, JASPER, JEFFERSON, LIBERTY, ORANGE, POLK, AND TYLER
COUNTIES IN SOUTHEAST TEXAS**

BACKGROUND

The GMP/DEIS is needed to update the management framework for the preserve. Several units have been added to the Big Thicket National Preserve since the 1980 general management plan was approved. Since 1980, the preserve has increased in size by 23,658 acres to a total of 108,208 acres. Because additional parcels were added after the 1980 general management plan was approved, there is no management guidance relative to desired conditions for these areas.

These new units and boundary adjustment contain a variety of vegetative communities that expand the biological diversity for which the preserve was created. Also, the land and water in these units has limited visitor access. Currently, there are five units of the preserve without facilities. Therefore, a new plan is needed to address management of these lands and the opportunities they present, as well as to address the new challenges facing the preserve not considered in the previous GMP. Management direction is needed on how best to conserve cultural and national resources and how to address evolving and expanding opportunities for interpretation and visitor experience, partnerships, and commercial visitor services at NPS' Big Thicket.

COMMENTS

The following comments are offered for NPS' consideration in preparation of the FEIS:

Mitigation

Page 117: The GMP/DEIS identified mitigative measures and best management practices that could be applied to avoid or minimize potential impacts from the implementation of the proposed project but does not address how the NPS will be bound to these measures.

Recommendation:

The FEIS should incorporate a commitment by the NPS to implement mitigation measures selected to reduce or avoid any adverse impacts from proposed project.

Threatened and Endangered Species

Page 290: The GMP/DEIS does not contain a final determination on the environmental consequences of the alternatives to threatened and endangered species. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) was contacted for threatened and endangered species consultation, but there is not a concurrence from the USFWS on any conclusion reached in the DMP/DEIS.

Recommendation:

The FEIS should incorporate concurrence from the USFWS on the NPS determination for impacts of the proposed project to threatened and endangered species.

National Historic Preservation Act Section 106 Consultation

Page 291: The GMP/DEIS provided information showing that Advisory Council on Historic Preservation and Texas State Historic Preservation Officers (SHPO) were contacted for coordination purposes under National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) Section 106 Consultation.

Recommendation:

The FEIS should incorporate any issues raised by and concurrence from Texas SHPO, Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and Tribal Historic Preservation Officer (THPO) on the conclusions reached in GMP/DEIS concerning historic, cultural, or archeological resources. NPS should continue consultations with Texas SHPO, Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and THPO during all appropriate phases of the GMP/DEIS and planning process.

Government-to-Government Consultation with Indian Tribes

Page 291: The GMP/DEIS provided information showing that potentially affected tribes were identified and contacted for government-to-government consultation under Executive Order 13175.

Recommendation:

The FEIS should incorporate any issues raised by Alabama-Coushatta Tribe of Texas and how those issues were addressed in the selection of the proposed alternative. NPS should continue consultations with Alabama-Coushatta Tribe of Texas during all appropriate phases of the GMP/DEIS and planning process.

General Air Quality/Smoke Management

The GMP/DEIS does not discuss controlled or prescribed burning activities for forest management within the preserve. Biomass burning releases nitrogen oxides (NO_x) and volatile organic compounds (VOCs), which are precursor compounds to ground-level ozone, as well as releasing fine-particle pollution (PM_{2.5}) which is commonly found in smoke and haze. Portions of the preserve occupy Hardin, Jefferson and Orange Counties, which form the geographic boundary of the Beaumont/Port Arthur 1997 8-hour Ozone National Ambient Air Quality Standard (NAAQS) maintenance area. Also, portions of the preserve occupy Liberty County, which lies within the geographic boundary of the Houston/Galveston/Brazoria 2008 8-hour Ozone NAAQS nonattainment area. Further, although the Houston/Galveston/Brazoria area is currently in attainment of the PM_{2.5} fine particulate matter NAAQS, it should be noted that the Clinton Drive monitor in Houston is a sensitive monitor for this criteria pollutant, which exceedances of the PM_{2.5} NAAQS have occurred at this site. Biomass burning could contribute to air quality concerns in both of these areas.

Recommendation:

The FEIS should specify the controlled or prescribed burning practices currently utilized within the preserve; identify how these practices follow or vary from any existing state or local smoke management plans applicable to the preserve area; and identify how existing practices could change under the proposed alternatives.

Wetlands

Page 42: The GMP/DEIS discusses the Lake Columbia Water Supply Project, and identifies that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers expects to release the Lake Columbia environmental impact statement for public comments in summer 2011. This is outdated information. The NPS should provide a more recent update on the status of the Lake Columbia project.

Recommendation:

The FEIS should incorporate updated Lake Columbia Water Supply Project information. EPA recommends NPS coordinate and contact Jennifer Walker with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Fort Worth District Regulatory Branch at (817)886-1863 to obtain the latest status on the project.

Invasive Species

Executive Order 13112, Invasive Species (February 3, 1999), mandates that federal agencies take actions to prevent the introduction of invasive species, provide for their control, and minimize the economic, ecological, and human health impacts that invasive species cause. Executive Order 13112 also calls for the restoration of native plants and tree species.

Recommendation:

The FEIS should clarify the invasive plant management plan to be used for monitoring and controlling noxious weeds. If herbicides or pesticides will be used to manage vegetation, the FEIS should disclose the projected quantities and types of chemicals. The invasive plant management plan should specify the methods that can be used to limit the introduction and spread of invasive species during and post-construction. The FEIS should specify alternative management practices that limit herbicides use and focus on other methods to limit invasive species vegetation and decrease fire risk. Additionally, the FEIS should specify how the project will meet the requirements of Executive Order 13112 for any new landscaping.

Hazardous Material and Hazardous/Solid Waste

The GMP/DEIS discusses the construction, operation, and maintenance of new visitor and preserve operational facilities, along with improvements to existing infrastructure under the proposed project's alternatives. The DEIS does not identify any impacts associated with hazardous material and/or hazardous or solid waste potentially produced by these activities.

Recommendation:

The FEIS should address the potential direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts of solid and hazardous waste from the construction, operation, and maintenance of new facilities and existing infrastructure and facility improvements. The document should identify projected solid and hazardous waste types and volumes, and expected storage, disposal, and management plans. The FEIS should address the applicability of state and federal requirements. Appropriate mitigation should be evaluated, including measures to minimize the generation of hazardous waste (i.e., hazardous waste minimization).

Fire Management Plan

The GMP/DEIS discusses the Fire Management Plan in relation to the proposed project. Additionally, it states that the five-year review and revision to the current fire management plan is underway, and is expected to be completed in January 2013. This appears to be outdated information. The NPS should provide a more recent update on the Fire Management Plan.

Recommendation:

The FEIS should incorporate updated information on the Fire Management Plan.

Other Associated Studies and Plans

According to the GMP/DEIS, the purpose of the GMP is to update a 1980 management plan for the preserve and to respond to changed conditions. However, the GMP/DEIS states additional studies and plans will be initiated subsequent to the completion of the GMP/DEIS. These plans and studies include the Wild and Scenic River Study, Trail Management Plan, Cultural Resource Management Plans, and Resource Stewardship Strategy. EPA is concerned that the proposed future plans and studies may lead to a need to modify the GMP/DEIS as proposed, which could lead to additional impacts not addressed in the DEIS.

Recommendation:

If significant modifications are made to the GMP as a result of these subsequent studies and plans, EPA recommends that the GMP/DEIS be supplemented with the appropriate NEPA document.